

DAWSON, W. H. R.

DRAWER

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CONTEMPORARIES

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Abraham Lincoln's Contemporaries

N.H.R. Dawson

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection



Lincoln Lore

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A VIEW OF LINCOLN FROM A HOUSE DIVIDED

Lincoln-related documents turn up in the most unlikely places. The Southern Historical Collection at the University of North Carolina Library in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, is rich in manuscript materials having to do with Lincoln's Confederate antagonists, but it has never been considered a major source of Lincolniana. The published catalogue of this vast collection, a substantial volume in itself, contains a subject guide, and there is only one reference to Abraham Lincoln in the whole index. However, it has proved to be a reference worth exploring. For many years, this collection has contained the papers of Nathaniel Henry Rhodes Dawson.

Dawson is typical of the sorts of persons about whom one would seek information in the Southern Historical Collection. Born in Charleston, South Carolina, in 1829, Dawson was the son of Lawrence E. and Mary Rhodes Dawson. He moved to Alabama in 1842, where he attended St. Joseph's College in Spring Hill. He became a lawyer in 1851 and moved to Selma, where he became a prominent citizen and a minor power in the Democratic party. Dawson married twice in the 1850's; both Annie E. (Mathews) Dawson and Mary E. (Tarver) Dawson bore him a child. In 1860, he was a delegate to the Democratic National Convention. In 1861, he volunteered as an officer in the Fourth Alabama Regiment of Volunteers. Dawson was elected to serve in the Alabama legislature in 1863. At the end of the war and his term in the legislature, he obtained a pardon from President Andrew Johnson and resumed private law practice. His interest in politics continued. Dawson served as a member of various county, district, and state Democratic committees and as an elector for Horace Greeley's 1872 presidential ticket. In 1875, he became president of the Commercial Bank of Alabama and a year later was chosen as a trustee of the University of Alabama. In

1880, he was again elected to the state legislature, and in 1884, he became president of the state bar association. He died in 1895.

What separates Dawson from the many Confederate soldiers and Democratic politicians whose lives can be studied from documents in the Southern Historical Collection is his marriage in 1863 to Elodie Todd, for she was Mary Todd Lincoln's half sister. The letters that Dawson and Elodie exchanged while they were engaged and he was away in the Confederate service are a source of information on the Todd family which has not been tapped, apparently, by previous students of Lincoln's in-laws. William H. Townsend's *Lincoln and the Bluegrass: Slavery and Civil War in Kentucky* (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1955), an updated version of his *Lincoln and His Wife's Home Town* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1929), contains no mention of the collection, though his book remains the best source of information on the Todd family. Ruth Painter Randall's *Mary Lincoln: Biography of a Marriage* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1953) relies heavily on Townsend's work for Mary's upbringing and makes no mention of the Dawson papers. *Mrs. Abraham Lincoln: A Study of Her Personality and Her Influence on Lincoln* by W.A. Evans (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1932) was an attempt at a psycho-biography of Mary Todd Lincoln and stressed the allegedly high incidence of mental instability in her family. However, Evans did not use Dawson's papers and made a minor error of fact about Elodie Todd and N.H.R. Dawson. There is certainly nothing in the letters which



FIGURE 1. Elodie Todd

Courtesy of Lloyd Ostendorf

upsets the work of these previous students of the Todd relations. Nevertheless, there are confirmations of hunches about the Todd family and evidence on at least one aspect of the family's history that was not previously known. There is an inter-

esting portrait of two of Lincoln's in-laws who have previously been little more than names. One can also gain a unique insight into the way the Confederate Todds viewed their Yankee sister and brother-in-law.

Elodie Todd

Elodie Todd was one of sixteen children sired by Robert Smith Todd of Lexington, Kentucky. She was the seventh of the eight children (who lived to maturity—another died in infancy) born to Robert S. Todd's second wife, Elizabeth Humphreys. Elodie was born in 1844, two years after her half sister Mary Todd married Abraham Lincoln in Springfield, Illinois. Mary was the fourth of six children (who lived to maturity—one died in infancy) by Eliza Parker, Todd's first wife. Since she had left home even before Elodie was born and since she was twenty-six years older, Mary and Elodie, though half sisters, were barely nodding acquaintances. The only times Elodie ever saw her sister Mary were in 1847, when the Lincolns paid a visit to Lexington en route to Washington for Lincoln to assume his seat in the House of Representatives; in 1848, when Mary and the children returned to Lexington without Congressman Lincoln; and in 1849, when the Lincolns visited Lexington to attend to Robert S. Todd's estate (he died in 1849). Mary saw Elodie last, then, when her young half sister was but five years old.

There were, despite the lack of intimate acquaintance, some obvious family resemblances between Elodie and Mary Todd. They were both cultured and refined women. Elodie's accomplishments were especially musical ones. She played the piano well and sang well. Dawson wrote her repeatedly, saying that he longed to be with her and to hear her sing and play the piano. Her talents were much in demand in Selma society to provide entertainment at various patriotic money-raising affairs during the war. Elodie wrote humorous letters and enjoyed society. She commented in May of 1861 on a local regiment "composed of the handsomest men [she] . . . ever saw & all seem to be selected gentlemen, & so happy & merry." In the same month she and her younger sister Kittie (Katherine) "went over to the Encampment . . . and spent a very pleasant evening dancing until eleven o'clock." She seemed pleased that "the wit & beauty of Selma were assembled" at the ball. She kept up with political events and could weave them into her letters with sprightly humor. In a moment of light-hearted self-deprecation, Elodie claimed that her family had thought she would be an old maid who would stay home to take care of her mother after the "handsome daughters" were gone. ". . . I really believe," she added in reference to her engagement to Dawson, "they all think I am committing a sin to give a thought to any other than the arrangements they have made for me but as this is the age when Secession, Freedom & rights are asserted, I am claiming mine & do not doubt but I shall succeed in obtaining them . . ." She also possessed some of the more controversial Todd traits, of which she showed an appealing self-awareness. Kidding Dawson again about their engagement, she said, "I told Mother that I thought she had better give her consent & approval at once, for my mind was made up & I felt myself more of a Todd than ever & they are noted for their determination or as *malicious people* would say *obstinacy*. . . ." On another occasion she admitted to Dawson that her mother had "always predicted my Temper & Tongue would get me into Trouble. . . ."

The Todd family itself was divided in some respects, and there were sharp differences between Elodie Todd and Mrs. Lincoln. The most obvious, of course, was that Elodie Todd was a staunch secessionist (only one of Eliza Parker's children was a secessionist; only one of Elizabeth Humphreys's children was pro-Union). Elodie always referred to Lincoln's party as the "black Republicans," and she pictured the Southern cause as a revolt against "Northern Tyranny" for the sake of liberty. On the Fourth of July, 1861, she exclaimed, ". . . what would we be without our liberty, the few left of us a poor unhappy set who would prefer death a thousand times to recognizing once a black Republican ruler." She called Lincoln's 1860 Southern Democratic opponent, Kentuckian John C. Breckinridge, her "model for Politicians." Her zeal for Southern liberty grew with the progress of the war. In July, 1861, after there had been the first large-scale fighting of a previously largely bloodless war, she wrote with unconscious irony, "I have thought of the many who would & must die to

purchase [liberty], . . . there is not a man among you who would not willingly prefer death to slavery. . . ." She did "not now think of peace for a moment, fighting alone can accomplish our end and that hard & bloody."

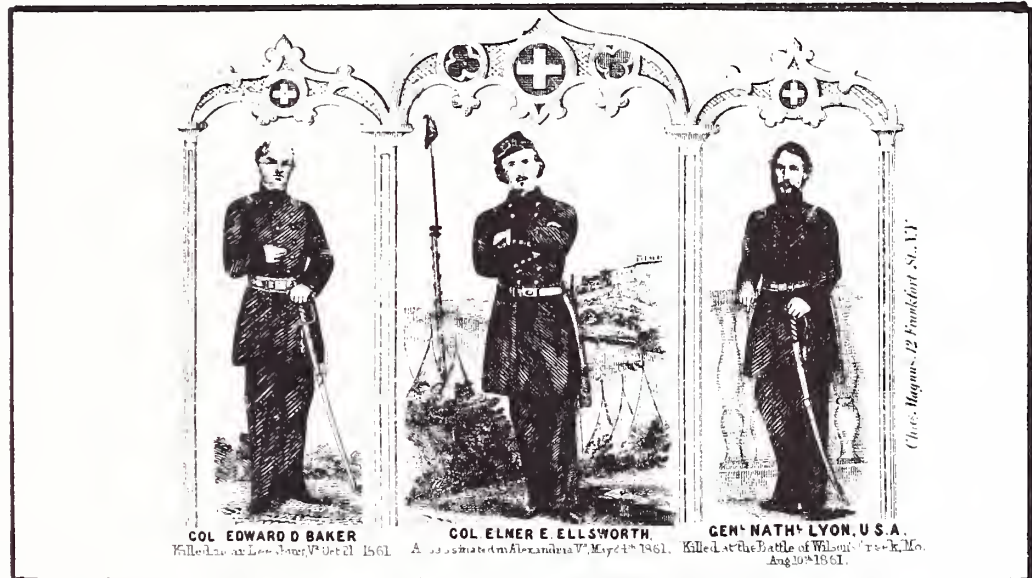
The young Kentuckian contributed more than hot words to the Confederate cause. She seems to have spent most of the time Dawson was in the service in sewing items for the Confederate soldiers. She took the work seriously, spending so much time on it that she had little time left to spend in reading. After the merry entertainments of the early months after Sumter when there was little bloodshed, she deemed it improper to engage in wild merriment while the soldiers were suffering at the front. Dawson wrote her that he was "grateful . . . to know that you have such proper feelings in regard to amusements, at times when your friends are in danger—on the day [in question] . . . we were all day in line of battle, & on that night slept on our arms— It would mortify me to think that at such a time, you could enjoy the festivities of a ball room. . . ."

Unlike her sister Mary, Elodie chose to marry a man, not of democratic manners and sentiments, but of an aristocratic, even snobbish, nature. When Dawson heard that one of Elodie's brothers was thinking of joining the army, he cautioned him "not to join the ranks as a private— The duties are very arduous, he would not like them—a gentleman" would not find them at all suitable. By contrast, Abraham Lincoln had served in the Illinois militia in the Black Hawk War, first as a captain and later as a private. One cannot imagine the Rail-splitter's dispensing such advice for gentlemen. At the Battle of Bull Run, Dawson was separated from his unit and in the confusion of battle could not find it to rejoin it. Rumors circulated back home in Selma that he had been seen "walking fast" away from the battle. Dawson was incensed at the allegation of cowardice and quickly attributed it to envy. The problem with the man Dawson thought responsible for circulating the rumor was that he "envied all above him . . . [.] He envies me I know. . . ." He attributed the rumors on another occasion to "the people, who are generally anxious to believe evil of gentlemen."

Although his aristocratic code taught him a paternalistic regard for those below him, Dawson did not admire the masses. As an officer, he did try to set an example for his men by sharing their hardships. On long marches he wore a knapsack with a heavy overcoat rolled on it, just as the soldiers did. On an eighteen-mile march, he went on foot even though a gentleman-friend offered him a horse and buggy. He did not prove, on this occasion, equal to the task, and the amusing outcome was reported to his fiancée with no self-conscious irony at all: "My feet were so blistered [and] swollen & I was so much fatigued, that I got a room, at a hotel, & went to bed & was unable to come on here, until this morning— I am very lame, have taken a violent cold, have been in bed" Dawson saw it as his duty to "visit the hospital daily to see our sick & always have my heart made sad— The pallets are occupied, with men, who are wan looking objects . . . [.] I always try to cheer them up, but it is a difficult duty." There was apparently no chaplain in the Fourth Alabama, and Dawson assumed the duty of shepherd to his flock. "On Sundays," he explained, "I read several chapters of the bible to as many of my men, as choose to come in, and we have some good vocal music . . . [.] Nevertheless, he commented also on "the depravity of our soldiers. . . [.] I do not think any other feeling than one of duty could induce me, with my present feelings, to adopt war as my occupation. . . ."

Dawson took an aristocrat's pride in his family's accom-

FIGURE 2. (facing page 2) Colonel Elmer Ephraim Ellsworth must certainly have been the most famous Colonel in the Civil War. Vignettes of his death, portraits of Ellsworth, pictures of his avenger, and mottoes invoking his memory appeared on many different patriotic envelopes during the Civil War. Southerners, as the Elodie Todd-N. H. R. Dawson correspondence reveals, also considered his death something of a sensation and interpreted it as divine retribution for invading their country. Three patriotic envelopes featuring Ellsworth are pictured on the facing page.



plishments. Honors came to aristocrats without any unseemly striving. "My father," said Dawson, "always declined political position, tho' he had inducements offered that would have lured a more ambitious man— He was the contemporary & peer of Mr Barnwell & Mr Rhett—their acknowledged superior & leader at the bar— He always advised me to pursue the law exclusively. . . ." He shared his Victorian culture's sentimental veneration of women (and especially of motherhood), and his aristocratic feelings made the female's ideal role particularly circumscribed, ethereal, and retiring:

God, who made man, saw that woman alone could fill the gasping void of companionship, in his bosom, and also created her, that her love might teach him the love he should bear to his creator— I do not think men could have received the Gospel, without the inspiring faith of the gentler sex to level him to an appreciation of their truth— All of the virtuous impulses, I ever feel, are attributable to the teachings of my sainted mother and the influence of your sex—without them I would have been a barbarian . . . [.]

Three weeks later he advised his fiancée thus:

I hope you will not become Secretary [?] for any aid Society— The ladies have been very useful & kind, but I would prefer that you remain an independent contributor— I am opposed to all female societies, as I have never seen one, not even a Bible or Church Society, where unpleasant controversies did not arise—a lady should let her influence always be felt, in all good works, but she should never expose herself to the calumnies of the evil minded. . . .

To be sure, Dawson encouraged the same kind of responsibility for inferiors among women as men:

I rejoice that you agree with me about societies of all kinds— I never wish to see you a member of one—but will always desire that you should do your full share in works of charity and benevolence— The poor will always, if my wishes influence, call you friend . . . [.]

An aristocrat's disdain for ambitious money-getting, a Democrat's traditional distrust of monopoly, and a patriot's dislike of selfishness in the midst of national crisis, all combined to make Dawson an enemy of wartime speculators. Salt was a precious commodity in the blockaded, undeveloped, one-crop South, and the "salt monopoly" apparently became a hot topic in Civil War Selma. It was a question which greatly excited Dawson:

. . . I wish these speculators could be forced into the service of the country & made to shew their patriotism in a better mode— I have no [illeg.] of such Shylocks, & I hope Public Opinion will bring them back to their propriety— The State should permit no speculation, by monopolists in articles of . . . necessity— In some parts of this state [Virginia] these "salt mice" have been threatened by Judge Lynch— Salt has been scarce here in the army on account of this disgraceful monopoly— Such heartless men are not friendly to the Confederate states . . . [.]

This was not just a temporary attitude bred of wartime emergency for Dawson. His aristocratic code dictated a disdain for new money. Commenting on a visit to Raleigh, North Carolina, in 1862, Dawson said, "Judging from all I see, I should say the society of Raleigh was cultivated [and] refined—in opposition to what we are so frequently disgusted with in new communities—tinsel pretension— Family has its influence, & parvenues are properly appreciated . . . [.] I have learned to hate the blatant democracy of our society— which would reduce any gentleman to insignificance—or to an infamous equality. . . ."

To complete the picture, Dawson was, as most of the self-styled Southern aristocracy were, a member of the Episcopal Church. He prided himself on reading "the English classics." He copied the ideals and ways of the English gentry, adopted their dislike of parvenues, and shared their idealization of a lower class that knew its place:

The poor private in the ranks, who bears uncomplainingly, all of his privations, must leave a deep well of patriotic feeling— I look at them frequently with admiration— Many of them have wife & children, at home, dependent on charity, & yet, they seem content— No country can be strong, without such a peasantry— or yeomanry—as we say in English. . . . [.]

Views of Lincoln

N.H.R. Dawson, of course, had never met Mr. and Mrs. Abraham Lincoln. Elodie did not know them well. The first mentions of the brother-in-law, now President of an enemy nation, were in a lighthearted vein in keeping with the early view that there might not be a war at all and that, if there were one, it would be of brief duration and be settled by one great battle. Dawson wrote Elodie from Virginia on May 8, 1861, asking her, "Can't you prevail upon your brother in Law, A.L. to change his policy, & make peace [?]" Two days later, Dawson said he thought the war would be short because the North would soon see how ridiculous it was to think of subjugating the South: "The idea of subjugating us must be preposterous, and I think, if I could be allowed to have the ear of my future brother in law, I could persuade him to abandon the idea; if he ever entertained it— Can't you use your influence or get your sister Miss Kittie [a very young teenager] to use hers [?]"

Six days later, Dawson was still ringing changes on the humorous possibilities involved in the situation. He stated his wish that Elodie would write Mrs. Lincoln "so that in case of being taken prisoner I will not be too severely dealt with— Do you not think it was a very politic step in me to engage such an advocate at the head quarters of the Enemy." Elodie replied in the same bantering vein, ". . . pray do you think to inform Brother Abe would do you any good, he would make you suffer for yourself my being such a secessionist too."

By another coincidence, Kittie had a nodding acquaintance with Colonel Elmer Ellsworth of the Seventh New York Regiment. Elodie wrote Dawson to report that "Kittie says if you take her beau Colonel Ellsworth prisoner just send him to her & she will see that he does not escape . . . [.] Dawson replied that he would not "let her throw herself away on Col. Ellsworth—as she must have a confederate Col. for her beau . . . [.] This joke ended in tragedy and bitterness when Ellsworth became the first casualty of the Civil War. Dawson wrote in a somewhat unfeeling vein:

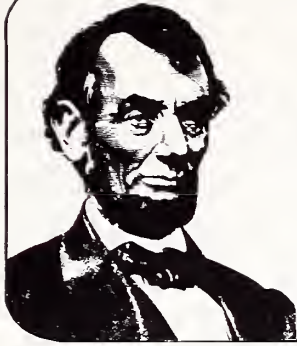
I hope Miss Kate was not interested in him, more than in an ordinary acquaintance— You know he exhorted his soldiers to invade the South & provided [promised ?] them "beauty & booty"— Providence seems to have cut him off, as soon as he touched our soil, and it will not surprise me, if the army, led on by hate, does not meet the same fate— There is great bitterness felt on our side, & we will kill all that we can lay our hands on . . . [.]

One day later he wrote in an even more bitter mood: "I rejoice that the 7 New York Reg was the first to be cut to pieces, & I hope a similar fate awaits all the enemies of my country— You will be surprised that I am so vengeful, but the invasion of Va. has stirred my blood—and, I think it would be a pleasure to meet our enemies in martial combat . . . [.] Elodie later informed Dawson that Ellsworth "was only an acquaintance of Kittie's [.]"

Political disagreements could not help but color the view these Southerners took of their famous Northern relation. The correspondence began to take on a slightly grimmer tone after Colonel Ellsworth's death. "Kittie is writing to Sister Mary (Mrs Abe Lincoln)," she told Dawson, "and I requested her to mention the fact of my being interested in you & should you fall into the hands of the [black republicans ?], hope you will be kindly received, presented with a passport to leave King Abe's Kingdom & returned to me with care but I am fearful since Ellsworth's death that the Southerners will fare badly if they get within their clutches and hope you will keep as far as possible from them . . . [.]"

Though she had previously denounced "Northern Tyranny," Elodie had not yet spread the charge to her brother-in-law, but the phrase "King Abe" broke the ice. However, such epithets remained uncharacteristic of Elodie's correspondence and, when used, were always kept within the realm of party politics and governmental policy. She never denounced Lincoln's personal character. With her this was an important and sensitive matter of principle:

(Continued in next issue)



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A VIEW OF LINCOLN FROM A HOUSE DIVIDED (Cont.)

. . . there is not one of us that cherish an unkind thought or feeling toward him and for this reason we feel as acutely every remark derogatory to him, except as a President. I never go in Public that my feelings are not pounded or are we exempt in Matt's own home for people constantly wish he may be hung & all such evils may attend his footsteps. We would be devoid of all feeling or sympathy did we not feel for them & had we no love for *Mary*, would love or respect her as the daughter of a Father much loved & whose memory is fondly cherished by those who were little children when he died I wish I were not so sensitive but it is *decided weakness* of the entire family and to struggle against it seems for naught...[.]

One detects an undertone of feeling that he had been properly chastised—perhaps in his switch from the overly familiar “Abe” to “Mr. Lincoln”—in Dawson’s reply: “I am really glad that you have such feelings about Mr Lincoln—I have never been able to entertain for him any unkindness, save as an enemy to my country—I have never believed the slanders up-

on him as a man—and accord to him the respect that is due a gentleman—It would indeed be strange if you felt otherwise, & did not love your sister . . . [.]”

Despite granting President Lincoln the ultimate compliment available in N. H. R. Dawson’s vocabulary, calling him a “gentleman,” the Alabama soldier could not help interpreting the Lincoln administration from his own Southern aristocratic viewpoint. For a long time, Dawson thought that Lincoln would be unable to prosecute the war as soon as Northern society realized the expense involved in raising armies. “It is thought,” Dawson reported to Elodie, “that the financial difficulties of Mr Lincoln will be so great as to embarrass the plans of the campaign—I hope that the Capitalists will not be willing to open their coffers to his draughts. Our Armies will fight without pay . . . [.]” Dawson was

clearly a believer in the Southern picture of the North as a dollar-conscious Yankee kingdom of selfish grab and gain. Romantically, he believed the South so untainted by materialism that even the common soldiers would fight without pay. Despite being a politician himself, Dawson’s aristocratic ideal of politics ruled out party ambition (hence his father’s refusal to serve, though he was a better lawyer than Rhett and Barnwell, famous South Carolina political leaders). He thought in July of 1861, that “Mr Lincoln should now rise above party & give peace to the country—but I fear he will not be equal to the position— He is too much a party man—I say this, my own dear girl, knowing how you feel, & with no idea that it will give you pain . . . [.]”

Elodie Todd replied to Dawson’s cautious defamation of Lincoln’s political character in a none-too-protective way:

I do not think of peace and know well Mr Lincoln is not *man enough* to dare to make it, he is but a tool in the hands of his Party and would not brave their wrath by such a proposition, how nobly he could redeem himself if he had the cour-

age he is no more fitted for the office than many others who have recently occupied it and we may date our trouble from the time when we allowed *Party* to place in the chair a President entirely disregarding his *worth* ability or capacity for it, and I hope our Confederacy may guard against it . . . [.]

Mary Todd’s sister then revealed the strength of family ties in the aristocratic Todd clan by admitting her double standard for judging the Todd family:

I could not be offended at your remarks concerning Mr L— Knowing they were not intended more for him than for his party or than for any other *Blk Rep. President*, and you do not say as much as I do, tho’ that is a privilege I allow myself exclusively, to abuse my relations as much as I desire but no one else can do the same before me or even say a word against



Courtesy Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina Library, Chapel Hill
FIGURE 1. N. H. R. Dawson

Kentucky.

By and large, Elodie Todd and N. H. R. Dawson as well were true to this standard—even to the extent of disbelieving anything they read in the newspapers which reflected poorly on Mary Todd. On July 22, 1861, she wrote one of the harshest appraisals of Mary Todd that appears anywhere in her correspondence.

I see from today's paper Mrs. Lincoln is indignant at my Brother David's being in the Confederate Service and declares "that by no word or act of hers would he escape punishment for his treason against her husband's government should he fall into their hands"—I do not believe she ever said it—and if she did & meant it she is no longer a Sister of mine, nor deserves to be called a woman of nobleness & truth & God grant my noble & brave hearted brother will never fall into their hands & have to suffer death *twice over*, and he could do nothing which would make *me prouder of him*, than he is doing now *fighting for his country*, what would she do to me do you suppose, I have so much to answer for?

Her fiancée replied with a letter which indicates that Dawson might have been less restrained in his appraisal of Lincoln had he not felt that he must be careful of Elodie's touchy Todd family pride:

I do not believe that Mrs Lincoln ever expressed herself, as you state, about your brother David.—If she did, it is in very bad taste, and in worse temper— and unlike all the representations I have seen of her character— But you will learn, my dearest, that a wife, soon becomes wrapped up in the fortunes of her husband & will tolerate in her relations no opposition to his wishes . . . [.]

Was Dawson hinting that Elodie might some day sever her loyalties from the Todd family and share a more "objective" view of the narrow party politician in the White House?

If Dawson thought so, he was quite wrong. In a dramatic episode, Elodie proved her loyalty to the Todd family name. In December of 1861, Selma citizens staged a "Tableau," a sort of costume charade in which living people staged a motionless picture, to raise money for a local regiment. Elodie was invited and intended to go, until she saw the programme:

. . . I see my Brotherinlaw Mr Lincoln is to be introduced twice I have declined as all my feeling & self respect have not taken wings & flown. I must confess that I have never been more hasty or indignant in my life than since the last step has been taken. What have we done to deserve this attempt to personally insult & wound our feelings in so public a manner. We have suffered what they never have and perhaps never will in severing ties of blood . . . [.] Dr. Kendree and Mrs Kendree last summer proposed that in one of the Tableaux we should introduce the two Scenes which they propose entertaining their audience with Tuesday night and I then in their *own home* showed the indignation that I felt at a proposition made to wound me. . . . [they wished] Mr Lincoln would be *caught & hung* . . . that was enough but I feel I can never feel kindly again toward those who take part in this, you do not know all we have taken from some of the people of this place, no not one half and *pride* has kept us from shewing them what we felt, I am afraid I shall never love Selma and I feel thankful that I am not dependent on its inhabitants for my happiness, hereafter I will stay to myself and keep out of the . . . way of those to whom my presence seems to be obnoxious . . . [.]

Elodie did stay home and apparently suffered a period of ostracism which severed her relations with her neighbors in Selma. Dawson tried to smooth over the difficulty as well as he could, explaining that Lincoln had become the "personification" of the enemy, but Elodie continued to complain bitterly about Selma, much to Dawson's obvious irritation. Todd family pride was a powerful force.

The Todd Family: A Startling Revelation

Most historians have assumed that Mary Todd Lincoln took an interest in political affairs that was extraordinary for a woman in her day because politics had been such a large and natural part of the Todd family life. Her father, Robert S. Todd, had been a politician himself. Lexington, though not the state capital, was an intensely political town because one of its citizens, Henry Clay, was a long-time contender for the United States Presidency. Todd was apparently associated with local men of ambition who wished to see Clay become President. As William Townsend has shown, Todd was involved in bitter political disputes because he supported the 1833 Kentucky law forbidding the importation of slaves into the state for purposes of sale. Some supporters of the law, written at the height of anti-slavery feeling within the South itself, argued that, without fresh infusions of black population, the slave power in the state would wither and eventually emancipate the slaves. Powerful pro-slavery interests in the state fought for the repeal of the nonimportation law and gained it just before Todd's death. When he ran for office, Todd received the bitter denunciation of the pro-slavery interests for being what he was not, an emancipationist. Thus Mary and the other Todd children knew the bitterness of politics as well as the satisfactions of being a family thought worthy of representing their community's political interests. Nevertheless, it is assumed that Mary gained a love of politics from the partisan milieu of her early life.

N. H. R. Dawson debated, while in the army, whether he should become a politician or devote himself to law practice when he ended his tour of duty. In May of 1861, he asked his fiancée what her feelings were about his future career. Dutifully, Elodie replied that she would be content with either choice. "One might suppose," she said, "to behold Mr Lincoln's Political career that my family would be content with Politics I am used to such a life My Father having followed such a one himself." When he asked again, he got a very different answer from Robert S. Todd's young daughter:

As to a Political life I think almost any choice preferable and more conducive to happiness, it is a life of trials vexations & cares, and in the end a grand disappointment to all the [illeg.] & purposes of the Politician himself & of his friends, that [there ?] are a few empty honors [nor] do they compensate when gained, for the trouble of a laborious life to please the World, which does indeed turn every day your friends today, your foes tomorrow, ready to tarnish your fair name with any untruth that will serve to promote party purposes. I know my Father's life was embittered after the selection of a Political life was made by his friends for him & he accepted it and after all the sacrifices he made for them & to acquire for himself Fame & a name which lived only a few years after he slumbered in his grave, and it was well he did not live longer to plunge deeper in for every other life had lost its charm and there was but the one that added he thought to his happiness. Yet I am wrong I expect to judge all by the few I have known to be otherwise than happy in such a choice, as much depends upon disposition and any life may have proved to have had the same effect . . . [.]

This is a remarkable letter which ones does not know quite how to interpret. It is, in the first place, the letter of a seventeen-year-old girl. It is, in the second place, the letter of a girl who was but five years old when her father died. Therefore, it is not altogether to be trusted.

Nevertheless, it is a unique view of a family which has remained shrouded in mystery and deserves careful consideration. It is unclear whether Robert S. Todd was truly embittered before his death (though Elodie says so) or whether the family projected their own bitterness, derived from the speed with which his fame faded after his death, onto their memory of Robert Todd. Such an interpretation would be congruent

with Elodie's statement that what name he gained faded quickly after his death and with the fact that she surely learned of this bitterness from her family long after her father's death. Probably a girl of five was unable to understand a bitterness bred of political chicanery.

Whether Elodie's view of politics and of her father's political career should cause us to reevaluate Mary Todd's alleged love of politics is a still more difficult question. Mary left home before her father engaged in the heated campaign for the state senate in 1845, in which Todd denounced his opponent as a man in a "fit of malice and desperation," "an habitual and notorious falsifier, an unscrupulous and indiscriminate calumniator, reckless alike of fame, of honor, and of truth," and a "miserable old man" who engaged in "unprovoked assaults, unfounded charges and illiberal insinuations." She was away in Springfield when her father was called by his opponent a "weak and vicious" man of "craven spirit" who worked as a legislator in the lower house to gain favors for the Branch Bank of Kentucky of which Todd was himself the president. Moreover, Robert S. Todd died in the midst of a campaign for reelection to the Kentucky Senate, and those of his family who were with him may somehow have blamed the campaigning for killing him. Especially to a child of five, it may have seemed as though whatever it was that took the father away from the house all the time on business (campaigning) simply took him away forever. From all these feelings and emotions Mary Todd Lincoln could well have

been quite immune. She may therefore have imbibed a love of politics from the early career of a father whose later career and death in the midst of campaigning left younger members of the family bitter about the profession of politics.

Other intimate glimpses of the Todd family provide interesting food for thought. Dawson seems to have been a devout man who took his Episcopalianism seriously as religion and not merely as a badge of his status in Southern society. He was distressed that Elodie, although she attended church, was not a full-fledged member. Elodie's professions of lack of adequate faith sound a bit perfunctory, but the subject appeared often enough in her letters to indicate genuine concern. "It was not necessary," she told her fiancée in a typical passage, "for you to ask me to pray for you as I have not allowed a day to pass without doing so, nor will not, altho' my prayers may not be heard & I regret each day more & more that I am not a good christian, as such my prayers might be of some avail, but I fear the life I have lead, does not entitle me to hope for much and it is so hard to be good. . . ." Dawson was quite concerned, and her reluctance in the face of urgings like this one surely betokened serious thought on the subject: ". . . I know that you have all the purity—all the essential qualifications—that would authorize you to take this step—that you are in all things, save the public confession—a christian . . . [.] There may have been some religious confusion among all the Todd children. Elodie's mother took her to the Presbyterian Church, but Elodie had gone to the Episcopal



FIGURE 2. The Todd home in Lexington is to be restored soon.

From the Lincoln National Life Foundation

Church at some time in her past. It will be remembered that Mary Todd Lincoln became a Presbyterian after her original Episcopalian affiliations. Elodie's confusion was doubtless increased by the fact that Dawson would have preferred her choosing the Episcopal Church, though he most wanted her to choose to make a full commitment for *some* church.

Elodie Todd's letters also seem to indicate that the family was a close-knit and happy one. "We have always been happy together," she told Dawson, "and never known what the feeling was that prompted others to always seek happiness away from home, and to feel miserable when compelled to remain there." Of course, Elodie did not have the experience Mary had, of gaining a new mother who was disliked by Mary's own grandmother. For Elodie, though, there was only one problematical member of the family.

Dr. George Todd is my Father's youngest son by his first marriage, but an almost total stranger to me for in my whole life I have never seen him but twice, the first time he was a practicing Physician, the next after my Father's death and owing then to some unpleasant family disturbances, there has never since existed between the older members of my family and himself & his older brother the same feeling as before or that is felt for our sisters I was too young at the time to even understand why the feeling was. When he called on [brother] David in Richmond, David would not see him or recognize him this I feel sorry for and hope they will yet make friends . . . [.]

It was little wonder that the other Todd children hated George. Robert S. Todd had written a will, but George contested it successfully on the technical grounds that there was only one witness to the document. This was a direct blow at Robert S. Todd's widow and the second batch of children because it meant the bulk of the estate, instead of passing to Mrs. Todd, had to be liquidated and divided among all the children. It speaks well for Mrs. Todd's restraint or for Elodie's loyalty to the family name that the young girl was seemingly unaware of what George had done and hoped there would be a reconciliation between him and other members of the family. Otherwise, Elodie made no distinctions in sisterly affection for all the children, whether by the first or second marriage.

It is somewhat surprising to find a member of the Todd family so violently anti-English as Elodie was. It was almost more than she could bear to have to hope that England would intervene in the Confederacy's behalf. On February 1, 1862, she wrote Dawson that she wished "we would have Peace or that France & England would recognize us, if they intend to, I confess I have little patience left, and wish we could take our time in allowing them to recognize the Confederate States. I hope they will pay for their tardiness in giving an enormous price, but I should not be so *spiteful*, but I never could tolerate the English and will not acknowledge like some members of the Family that [we] are of English descent, I prefer being *Irish* and certainly possess some Irish traits. . . ." Not only does this passage inform us of a peculiar difference of opinion within the family in regard to England, it also reminds us of what is easy to forget: Confederate diplomacy was unnatural. Southerners, at least the Presbyterian ones, hated England as much as Northerners did, and their desire for rescue by England was pure expedience. It showed in the King Cotton theory of diplomacy as well: it was surely an odd way to make friends with England by denying her the Southern cotton she needed for her mills.

Only part of Elodie's alienation from Selma, Alabama, stemmed from her feud over the proper limits for criticizing her brother-in-law. Elodie considered herself a Kentuckian, and she had trouble all along developing any enthusiasm for her fiancée's home town in Alabama. She suffered agonies over Kentucky's reluctance to secede and join the other Confederate states. She delivered tongue-lashings to those Alabamans unlucky enough to criticize Kentucky in her pre-

sence, and she followed the career of Kentucky's John C. Breckinridge closely. Whether all the Todd children felt such an intense identification with their native state is an interesting question with interesting implications. Might Abraham Lincoln's Kentucky background have been more important to Mary Todd than we have previously realized?

EPILOGUE

N. H. R. Dawson reenlisted once his original term of service was up. He led a cavalry unit in the late part of the war. Elodie chided herself for her selfishness in wishing that he would stay home and realized that she must not interfere with her husband's sense of duty to Alabama and the Confederacy. Dawson must hardly ever have been at home in the early period of their marriage, for he attended sessions of the state legislature and led the cavalry when the legislature was in recess.

Mrs. Dawson made other adjustments to her husband's ways. She lived in Selma the rest of her life. She must also have made her peace with Mr. Dawson's interest in politics, for he never ceased to dabble in politics. She never repudiated her identification with Southern interests or her secessionist sympathies. She became a leader of the movement to erect a Confederate monument in Selma's Live Oak Cemetery. In fact, she defied her husband's dislike of female volunteer societies and became president of the Ladies' Memorial Association of Selma. One could not have predicted this assumption of leadership in Selma society in the period of her withdrawal from a society which had insulted a Todd brother-in-law. She bore N. H. R. Dawson two children. In 1877, she died and was buried near the Confederate monument she had helped to build.



Courtesy of J. Winston Coleman, Jr.

FIGURE 3. Dr. George Todd, the black sheep.

